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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on cases in which colleges have handled confidential assessment reports of students with special learning needs in a manner that violated the students' rights to privacy. Guidelines are suggested for students in order to ensure that information that is shared with postsecondary institutions is used in a way that will enhance student-faculty communication and student success. These guidelines include keeping original reports of assessment information, ensuring that information provided to faculty is accurate and comfortable for the student to share, using short direct ways to share information, allowing enough time for the disabilities office to prepare adaptations, and enrolling the support of an advocate in dealing with the disabilities office. (JDD)

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# GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS WHO ARE SHARING CONFIDENTIAL INFORMATION WITH COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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As increasing numbers of exceptional students go on to post-secondary education, it has become common practice for universities and other post-secondary institutions to require students to document special learning needs in order to qualify for special assistance. This process is necessary in a time of limited resources, to ensure that those most in need of special educational adaptations are given the highest priority for tutoring, special testing, readers, technology and other resources. Documentation also ensures that post-secondary institutions know how many students may need given services, or which students may qualify for special grants or other funding.

Ordinarily, the exchange of information necessary for the educational process moves easily and smoothly. However, some learning disabled students have encountered problems that should be of concern to disabled students and college disability offices as well. In at least two recent instances, colleges have handled confidential student assessment reports in a manner that violated students' rights to privacy. In these cases, specific diagnostic information about personality style (including terms such as "fearfulness", "anger", etc.), intelligence and social histories have been distributed widely through faculty and staff of the colleges involved. In both cases, this caused the students

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involved considerable embarrassment and unease, in spite of the fact that there instances didn't represent a deliberate abuse of student rights to privacy, but resulted from a zeal to serve students completely. These violations of privacy did not enhance communication between students and the college representatives serving them. In one case, the student's specific wishes that certain personal information not be given to faculty were specifically overridden, leaving the student feeling angry and powerless to rectify the situation. Student fears that very personal information would be distributed to individuals who are untrained in assessment and so wouldn't be used appropriately, seemed valid. One student reported that her professors seemed to have labeled her as a problem and expected her to do badly in classes as soon as they met her.

In order to ensure that information that is shared with post-secondary institutions is used in a way that will enhance student-faculty communication and student success, I suggest that students follow these guidelines:

1. <u>Students should keep original reports of assessment information</u>

   Students should always keep the original copy of any assessments, physician's letters or other information that is written about them. When the student wishes to share information with a college, the student should prepare to give a copy of the original to the college disabilities coordinator. If a college wishes to keep a copy of private correspondence, disabled students

should ask the disabled students representative to write down specific guidelines about how the information will be used and about who will see it.

2. If the student feels uncomfortable with the answer to Item 1, he must say so.

Colleges usually send letters to instructors that delineate suggestions for adopting instruction for special needs students. This is done in an attempt to maximize the chances of success for disabled students. Students may contribute to these letters before they are sent to faculty, to ensure that the information they contain is both accurate and comfortable for the student to share with instructors. If this is not the case, students should ask for a chance to revise information sent out until it matches student expectations.

3. Use short direct ways to share information

Often, educational or psychological reports have cover letters that contain enough information to qualify the student as eligible for special services, yet don't reveal the private information contained in the body of a report. In some cases, this may be enough for the university to declare the student eligible for special services. Whether written by a consultant or by the disabilities office, these letters to faculty and staff will be most useful is they contain specific recommendations for programming. For example, specific

suggestions might include a recommendation that a student receive one and one half the time usually allotted for tests, or that the student not be asked to copy from the board.

5. Allow enough time for the disabilities office to prepare adaptations

   Some procedures designed to help special students may take time to implement. Students should plan to meet with the disabilities office at least two or three months ahead of the academic term in which special services will be needed. For example, meeting with a college disability representative in May would help the college be better prepared to meet special student needs in September.

6. Take an advocate for support

   If talking to the disabilities office is a larger challenge than feels comfortable, students should take someone along who is familiar with the process. This could be another disabled student who has already been through the process, a consultant, or even a family member. These helpers can play an active role in talking to the disabilities representative or they may just provide moral support.

In summary, post-secondary institutions are ready for students who learn differently, but it is up to individual disabled students to ensure that information given to the college will enhance the student's learning environment. Planning ahead will

help learners work effectively with post-secondary institutions of higher education and will send the message that learners are in charge of their own successes.